

Invest Early, Invest Smart Expanding access to high-quality early learning

Summary of table discussions

On April 19, people attending a Wilder Research forum learned more than one-third of Minnesota's children age 5 and under – 156,000 children – live in low-income households. At best, only about half of these high-need children have access to quality early learning. Attendees heard a panel discussion about four approaches to increasing access and then participated in table discussions to identify key needs and policy changes. This summary of the table discussions has been provided to Barbara Yates, panel moderator and chair of the Early Learning Council. The council makes recommendation to the Governor, Children's Cabinet, and the legislature.

Make it a priority

It's not that we don't know what needs to get done; the challenge is to make it a priority:

- Fundamentally changing our thinking around the value of early childhood learning and backing it up with dedicated, long-term funding.
- Increasing community support, engagement, and understanding of needs and issues.
- Setting funding and policies at the federal level.
- Reallocating funds – investing more in early childhood education; less on keeping youth in jail/detention.

Remove barriers

We must remove barriers to increasing access by:

- Changing eligibility requirements.
- Increasing affordable transportation options.
- Using common language and understanding of providers and alignment.
- Addressing language barriers.
- Increasing flexibility in credentialing – including credit for experience.
- Balancing capacity-building against needs of today.

Comprehensive and collaborative

A more holistic, comprehensive, and collaborative approach is needed, including:

- A system that incorporates health care, mental health, etc. and spans from pre-natal to higher education.
- A common, collective goal such as the Strive models in Kentucky and Ohio.
- Better collaboration by checking egos at the door – remember it's about the people we serve and real collaboration requires a willingness to give up power.
- A strategic process to engage a variety of stakeholders (parents, educators, nurses, business owners, etc.) in communities.
- A review of how block grants are handed down.
- Pooled resources with realistic expectations of what they can accomplish.
- Neutral partners who mediate the conversation, design and learning of a collaborative.
- Shared data – parent survey, demographics, child outcome, training needs.

Child-centered

Programs, approaches, and policies must be more child-focused, including tying scholarships, waivers, and funding to the child, not the parent, or the system.

continued

Cultural responsiveness

To be culturally responsive, we need;

- Cultural awareness that goes beyond ethnicity and race.
- Institutional change – cannot have focus on only “middle-class white culture;” policies need to reflect the population being served.
- Cultural groups included at the table from the beginning – involved in the design, planning, etc.
- Multiple parent/community member ambassadors.
- Multiple early childhood education program options so parents can choose what fits with their values.
- More people of color who are credentialed to staff the centers.
- An understanding of institutionalized racism.
- Community organizing around neighborhood/ community/cultural needs to generate programs that work.
- Culturally-specific classes.
- Studies done by people within the cultural group, so their story is being told from their perspective.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS TOPIC

Presentations:

View videos from forums on this topic including from Invest early, Invest Smart Perspectives event.

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDA0C9A6F95BCA146>

Reports:

[How we can close the early learning access gap for low-income children in Minnesota](#)

April 2012

Introduces the trends and gaps in access to high-quality early learning opportunities and four approaches to expanding access.

[Early education reform blueprint](#)

Minnesota Early Learning Foundation,
October 2011

Outlines the importance of school readiness, describes reforms found to be effective, and makes policy recommendations for improvement.

[Early learning left out: Building an early learning childhood system to secure America's future](#)

3rd edition

Voices for America's Children

November 2010

Examines public investment in the education and development of children by child age. It focuses on the gap between what is currently invested and the need, focusing on early childhood. Data are provided by state.

Find these reports and more in the Early Childhood library section of Minnesota Compass, mncompass.org

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